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Abducted newsman free in Damascus

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SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

BEIRUT — Jeremy Levin, Cable News Network bureau chief, spent a night of freedom — his first in nearly a year — in Damascus last night after he either escaped or was released from his captors in the Bekaa Valley.

The shadowy Islamic Jihad (Holy War), a fundamentalist Shi'ite Moslem organization, claimed responsibility for his kidnapping in March 1984.

It was not clear last night whether he had escaped or was released.

Agence France-Presse, the French news agency, reported that Mr. Levin, 52, escaped from his kidnappers and turned himself over to Syrian troops in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley at about 2 a.m. yesterday.

Mr. Levin was photographed by the news agency dressed in pyjamas and a zipped-up winter coat. He was heavily bearded, and his hair and mustache were unkempt.

Correspondents in Beirut who knew Mr. Levin said they hardly recognized the gaunt, bearded figure in the photograph.

Mr. Levin is believed to have been photographed in a Syrian secret service station in the Bekaa Valley. The Syrian troops occupying parts of Lebanon are concentrated in this poppy-growing region. Fundamentalist Shi'ite organizations and Iranian revolutionary guards still operate from the ancient Roman city of Baalbeck, near the site of Mr. Levin's appearance.

The Shi'ite leader and head of the Amal militia, Nabih Berri, has long been trying to obtain Mr. Levin's release. Mr. Berri is also the Lebanese minister of justice.

Mr. Levin's whereabouts in Damascus, the Syrian capital, were unknown. The U.S. Embassy in Beirut said yesterday that the Syrians were holding him in Damascus. The embassy said it was negotiating for his return to the United States.

(Cable News Network in Atlanta told The Washington Times last night it had chartered a plane in Rome and its bureau chief there would fly to Damascus last night to accompany Mr. Levin to Frankurt. An Air Force plane left Washington, D.C., yesterday for Frankfurt with Mr. Levin's wife, Lucille, who lives in Washington, aboard.

(A State Department official, several family members and a CNN representative were aboard the military plane.

(In Washington, White House spokesman Larry Speakes told reporters the Situation Room in Washington had informed senior administration officials yesterday of the development. National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane telephoned President Reagan at his remote mountain ranch to tell him the news.

("We don't know if he was released or escaped," said Mr. Speakes. "We know he is in Syrian hands and that he is safe. We are certainly relieved that he is no longer a captive."

(First word of Mr. Levin's freedom came when the U.S. ambassador in Damascus was informed of it by the Syrian government, Mr. Speakes said.

(The Syrian ambassador to the United States, Rafiq Jouejati, reportedly said his government had secured the release.

(At a Washington news conference with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, the civil right leader who maintains close ties to Syrian government officials, Mrs. Levin said she believed her husband was released by his captors as a goodwill gesture.

("Every time a hostage is released, it is a sign of peace," Mr. Jackson said. "We ought to seize the opportunity to broaden the base of dialogue." Both said they had been in contact with the Syrian Embassy in Washington, "which had assured us of his safe return.")

The Agence France-Presse photographs contain various pieces of information and clues regarding Mr. Levin's escape. One photograph, widely circulated among the Beirut correspondents, shows a weary Mr. Levin with a picture of Syrian President Hafez al Assad in the background.

Other photographs show him with a message to his wife, saying he is in good shape and sending his love and regards to his family.

Four other Americans remain in captivity. They are believed to have been kidnapped by the Islamic Jihad.

They are William Buckley, a political officer in the American Embassy in Beirut; the Rev. Martin Lawrence Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest who directed the U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services office in Beirut; Peter Kilburn, an American University of Beirut librarian, and the Rev. Benjamin M. Weir, a Presbyterian minister.

Theories here in Beirut hold that the four are being held in the Bekaa Valley or the southern suburbs of Moslem West Beirut, or that they are dead.

Secrecy still surrounds the release of two former kidnap victims — Jonathan Wright of Reuters news agency and David Dodge, the former president of the American University of Beirut.

Because of the delicacy of negotiating the release of foreigners kidnapped in Lebanon, there is speculation that the true story of Mr. Levin's release may never be known.

(Miles Cunningham and Jeremiah O'Leary contributed to this report, which was also augmented by wire dispatches.)

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